

## The Negative Power of Positivity: Achievement Society, Social Media, and the Pandemic

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**Abstract:** The study focuses its lens on achievement society and the achievement-subject. The study aims to understand the negative effects of social media on the individual through the positivity of achievement society. It is a different path of analysis on two relevant and heavily researched issues, social media and mental health, strongly influenced by a philosophical lens. Furthermore, this paper also intends to answer the question: “How does modern-day social media shape the achievement-subject, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?” The paper begins with an analysis on achievement society and contrasts it with Michel Foucault’s disciplinary society. I do this by explicating Michel Foucault’s conception of disciplinary society and Han’s method of distinction by accentuating the modal verb of compulsion such as “may not” and “should” contra the positivized verb of “can” found in achievement societies. Using psychoanalytic concepts of the super-ego and its positivized version, the ego-ideal, Han borrowed from Sigmund Freud, the obedience-subject and achievement-subject of disciplinary and achievement society, respectively, are explored. Focus is then shifted to a discussion of the impacts of social media and its capitalization of positivized spaces on the achievement-subject and how achievement society utilizes the romanticization of overwork and exploitation as a means of furthering the productivity of achievement-subjects and in reinforcing the neoliberal paradigm in the socio-political and economic landscape. These are further related to the ideas of Mark Fisher in his elaboration of reflexive impotence by citing a few examples. The study then takes a brief detour to revisit how Byung-Chul Han’s conception of the achievement-subject compares to Karl Marx’s theory of alienation, and how Han’s theory rethinks the Marxian notion of alienation. Lastly, the study posits that social media in achievement society negatively affects people through the positivity it proliferates and leads to achievement-subjects exploiting themselves in the name of productivity and achievement and those who are pressured or expected to be productive tend to face exhaustive depression. The study contextualizes its discussions within the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Keywords:** *disciplinary society, achievement society, obedience-subject, achievement-subject, social media*

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has been raging for more than two years now. Two years since schools have been closed and work-from-home setups have been implemented. During this time, the world has surely seen a dramatic shift in how things move and act. Social distancing measures, vaccine mandates, and the like have all been part of the “new normal”. Even in this momentous shift in our society, there have been things that remained, in spite of the pandemic.

Neoliberal policies, the doctrine of efficiency in production, and the general crisis of capitalism still linger. The efficiency of production amid the pandemic has inspired the general direction of my paper. This notion of efficiency is further enforced by what Byung-Chul Han calls “achievement society”, wherein the negativity of Foucault’s disciplinary society is replaced with positivity. In other words, modal verbs of negativity and compulsion such as *may not* and *should* are replaced with the positive *can*.<sup>1</sup> In an achievement society, what Han calls achievement-subjects are made to engage in self-exploitation in order to achieve something. As Han writes about the achievement-subject: “...the contemporary achievement-subject [is] inflicting violence on, and waging war with, itself.”<sup>2</sup> In the times of home quarantines and lockdowns, the effects of achievement society can be observed and analyzed.

Hence, the study aims to understand the negative effects of social media on the individual through the positivity of achievement society. Furthermore, this paper also intends to answer the question: “*How does modern-day social media shape the achievement-subject, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic?*”. This study mainly uses Byung-Chul Han’s analysis of achievement society and the achievement-subject in his book *The Burnout Society*. The paper begins with an analysis on achievement society and contrasts it with Michel Foucault’s disciplinary society. I do this by explicating Michel Foucault’s conception of disciplinary society and Han’s method of distinction by accentuating the modal verb of compulsion such as “*may not*” and “*should*” contra the positivized verb of “*can*” found in achievement societies. Using psychoanalytic concepts of the super-ego and its positivized version, the ego-ideal, Han borrowed the obedience-subject and achievement-subject of disciplinary and achievement society from Sigmund Freud. The latter, respectively, are to be explored. The focus of the paper is then shifted to a discussion of (1) the impacts of social media and its capitalization of positivized spaces on the achievement-subject, (2) and how achievement society utilizes the romanticization of overwork and exploitation as a means of encouraging the productivity of achievement-subjects and reinforcing the neoliberal paradigm in the socio-political and economic landscape. These are further related to the ideas of Mark Fisher in his elaboration of *reflexive impotence* by citing a few examples. The study then takes a brief detour to revisit how Byung-Chul Han’s conception of the achievement-subject compares to Karl Marx’s theory of alienation, particularly how Han’s theory rethinks the Marxian notion of alienation. Lastly, the study posits that social media in achievement society negatively affects people through the positivity it proliferates because it leads achievement-subjects to exploit themselves in the name of productivity and achievement. Thus, those who are pressured or expected to be productive tend to face exhaustive depression. The study, however, contextualizes its discussions to only be within the COVID-19 pandemic.

## Disciplinary Society and Achievement Society

Gilles Deleuze once claimed and credited Michel Foucault for locating what is known as a *disciplinary society* which is characterized by its ability to “organize vast spaces of enclosure” where an individual relentlessly passes through different spaces of enclosure, and people are compared to prisoners.<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, a disciplinary society is aimed at making its systemic elements docile and

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<sup>1</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Burnout Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 8.

<sup>2</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 35.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, “Postscript on the Societies of Control,” *October* 59, Winter (1992): 3.

useful at the same time.<sup>4</sup> The “discipline” in disciplinary society has two images. According to Foucault, the first image consists of the discipline-blockade which is “on the edges of society” and has a negative function.<sup>5</sup> The other image is called the discipline-mechanism which “improve(s) the exercise of power by making it lighter, more rapid, more effective, a design of subtle coercion for a society to come.”<sup>6</sup> Looking at how disciplinary society is characterized, the following elements can be observed: enclosure, compulsion, and negativity. Disciplinary society is defined by prohibition and compulsion. The modal verb *may not* prohibits whereas the modal verb *should* compels.<sup>7</sup> Han compares disciplinary society to Freud’s analysis of the psychic apparatus, wherein this apparatus is a repressive one with “prohibitions and commands that subjugate and repress.”<sup>8</sup> Freud himself defines the ego as responsible for the institution of repression of instinctual impulses.<sup>9</sup> In the case of the COVID-19 pandemic and how it affected everyday life, one may see certain elements of both Foucault’s disciplinary society and Han’s achievement society. One may argue for the restrictions and how lockdown policies are reminiscent of how disciplinary societies operated through prohibition.

This society of compulsion, repression, and negativity differs from what Han calls an *achievement society*. Unlike disciplinary society that prohibits and compels which relies on modal verbs such as *may not* or *should*, achievement society relies on the positivity of *can*. Han claims that the negativity of disciplinary society hits a wall or a limit in terms of expanding production and efficiency.<sup>10</sup> The expansion of production is inhibited by the negativity of *no* in a disciplinary society, the *yes* and *can* of achievement society is faster and more efficient compared to the old paradigm.<sup>11</sup> Compared to a society of discipline that compels and prohibits, the current society of achievement, as Han puts it, is constantly shedding negativity in order to show itself as a society of freedom.<sup>12</sup> The mental illnesses that a disciplinary society produces differ from that of an achievement society. Freud’s repressive psychic apparatus is one built for Foucault’s disciplinary society and is plagued by neurotics and psychotics.<sup>13</sup> The illnesses of contemporary achievement society on the other hand are those of depression and burnout, created by the overabundance of positivity driven by the neoliberal ethos of productivity and efficiency.<sup>14</sup> It can be understood that an achievement society, unlike disciplinary society, is abundant in positivity in order to achieve a higher level of production and efficiency and relies on affirmation instead of prohibition. The depressives and victims of burnout in achievement society become products of the liberated ego ideal and the sense of freedom and self-responsibility.

In the development of an achievement society, one can easily see social media’s role in it. Through social media, pages and social media accounts that perpetuate the positivity of achievement society run rampant. Self-help books, influencers, and hustle culture have become a common sight on the internet. Its positivity creates violence wherein people engage in destructive behavior in order to

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<sup>4</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 218.

<sup>5</sup> The “negative function” Foucault speaks of here involves “arresting evil, breaking communications, and suspending time.” See Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 209.

<sup>6</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 209.

<sup>7</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 8.

<sup>8</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 36.

<sup>9</sup> Sigmund Freud and Anna Freud, *The Essentials of Psycho-Analysis* (London: Vintage, 2008), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 9.

<sup>11</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 9.

<sup>12</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 36.

<sup>13</sup> Freud’s theory of neurosis is a result of a failed suppression of the id by the ego and results in a conflict between the two. Psychosis on the other hand is an active remodeling of reality. See Freud, *The Essentials of Psycho-analysis*, 24, 570.

<sup>14</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 9.

reach the *ego ideal* and create a false sense of freedom.<sup>15</sup> In contemporary society, social media is a factor for the self-destruction of the individual. By altering and affecting an individual's perception on labor and work ethic, achievement society and social media come hand-in-hand as a factor for the constitution of the achievement-subject. This shall be given deeper analysis in the latter parts of this study.

### The Obedience-Subject and the Achievement-Subject

The obedience-subject and achievement-subject are two different entities. The former is compelled by negativity, while the latter is compelled by positivity. The obedience-subject can be related to disciplinary society. As stated in the preceding section, a disciplinary society is ruled by negativity, prohibition, and compulsion. Negativity and the sense of duty is ingrained within the psyche of the obedience-subject. Han writes that obedience-subjects repress their supposed inclinations in order to pursue their duty.<sup>16</sup> Their psyche resembles the Freudian psychic apparatus of repression and duty. Han writes that the obedience-subject is subjected to the Freudian *super-ego*.<sup>17</sup> This restrictive super-ego that is the heir of the Oedipus complex and the fear of castration,<sup>18</sup> confronts the ego as a "strict father confronts a child."<sup>19</sup> In other words, the obedience-subject does not see oneself as free and is restricted and compelled by an *Other*. The achievement-subject, on the other hand, is not compelled by this *Other*. Unlike the obedience-subject who is subjected to the super-ego, the achievement-subject is one that projects itself to what is called the *ego ideal*.<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Han explains:

Negative compulsion issues from the superego. In contrast, the ego ideal exercises a positive compulsion on the ego. The negativity of the superego restricts the freedom of the ego. Projecting oneself into the ego ideal is interpreted as an act of freedom. But when the ego gets caught in an unattainable ego ideal, it gets crushed altogether. The gap between the real ego and the ego ideal then brings forth auto-aggression.<sup>21</sup>

In the passage, Han explains a false sense of freedom when the achievement-subject projects itself to the ego ideal due to the positive compulsion it exercises. In other words, it allows the achievement-subject to attempt to attain this ego ideal yet, the failure of the achievement-subject to attain this ego ideal brings forth auto-aggression. This can be further explained by what Freud describes as the "cruelty of the ego ideal towards the ego" which is characterized by guilt imposed by the ego ideal upon the ego, and in the case of melancholia (a term used to describe depression in Freud's time), the ego is forced to accept this imposition of guilt from the ego ideal.<sup>22</sup> To relate Freud's idea to Han, in the moment the achievement-subject fails to reach or accomplish something, for example, they blame no one but themselves as they are free and not restricted, unlike the obedience-subject. This is such the case in an achievement-society wherein the once restrictive super-ego (the principle that prohibits, ex. *Thou shalt not...*) is positivized and becomes the ego ideal (the principle that positively compels by saying one *can* become this or that), which in turn gives a sense of liberation to the achievement-subject by putting the responsibility of achieving on themselves. This sense of

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<sup>15</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 46.

<sup>16</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 37.

<sup>17</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 46.

<sup>18</sup> Freud, *The Essentials of Psycho-analysis*, 399.

<sup>19</sup> Freud, *The Essentials of Psycho-analysis*, 41-42.

<sup>20</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 46.

<sup>22</sup> Freud, *The Essentials of Psycho-analysis*, 471-472.

responsibility brought on by the “freedom” of the positivization of the super-ego into the ego ideal leads to the self-exploitation of the achievement-subject, which for Han, is violent and more efficient, as the achievement-subject is the one who compels itself to burn itself out.<sup>23</sup>

This distorted notion of freedom and self-responsibility ingrained into the achievement-subject’s psyche is further perpetuated by a neoliberal doctrine that is fixated on efficiency, productivity, and further accumulation of capital. Because of the positivization in achievement society, and the more efficient achievement-subject as its result, this neoliberal ethos of efficiency in production is more easily achieved. Along with this, a “mental health” plague has taken over as a costly consequence of making a dysfunctional capitalist system appear to work.<sup>24</sup> It can be seen here that the supposed “freedom” of the achievement-subject is their very own reason for enslavement. Moreover, the consequences of neoliberalism and achievement-society are not only on an individualized or personal level, but rather it extends to the socio-political. For example, Mark Fisher argues that students under a neoliberal economic system suffer from what he calls *reflexive impotence*, wherein these students are resigned to their fate and that every bad thing happening is a self-fulfilling prophecy.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, Fisher relates this *reflexive impotence* to those suffering from learning disabilities or mental health problems. It is apparent in this situation that achievement society and the neoliberal order that benefits from its positivity not only mentally drains the achievement-subject, but also leads them to a form of apathy and resignation to their fates, as if their sufferings are meant to be.

### Social Media and the Achievement-Subject

In the recent decade, it is apparent that social media has become an effective tool for communication and creating connections. Moreover, it can also be used in getting important ideas and messages across and changing one’s perceptions. Social media has been linked to many problems our contemporary society currently faces. Some problems include trolls, fake news, cyberbullying, and mental distress. For this section, I focus on some popular social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube. Before I go on, we may ask ourselves: “How does social media relate to the achievement-subject?” To begin with, social media platforms promote the idea of transparency which accelerates the streams of capital, communication, and information and sheds all negativity. Hence, a society of transparency manifests itself in a society of positivity.<sup>26</sup> Han claims that “transparency is inherently positive” wherein depoliticized spaces become its consequence as these spaces avoid negativity that may question the political status quo.<sup>27</sup> This is the very reason why social media platforms such as Facebook only have “likes”<sup>28</sup> (and recently giving the option to hide the number of reactions to a post) and YouTube virtually removing the dislike button to “prevent its creators from harassment.”<sup>29</sup> But the real reason for this, as Han would claim, is that negativity impedes information exchange. True to what Han claims, how can one engage with a YouTube video (which generates revenue through exchange of information by means of the video) when there are dislikes indicative of the video’s quality? This lack of negativity and the depoliticization of social media with the positivity

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<sup>23</sup> Han, *The Burnout Society*, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2009), 19.

<sup>25</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 21.

<sup>26</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *The Transparency Society*, trans. Erik Butler (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2015), 1.

<sup>27</sup> Han, *The Transparency Society*, 7.

<sup>28</sup> Han, *The Transparency Society*, 7.

<sup>29</sup> Patrick Knox, “Why Did YouTube Remove the Dislike Count?,” *The US Sun*, December 14, 2021, <https://www.the-sun.com/tech/4268641/why-did-youtube-remove-dislike-count/>.

of achievement society has helped in creating achievement-subjects who are not just mentally ill, but also, as Fisher would put it, *reflexively impotent*.

During this pandemic, many people suffered financially brought on by the economic crisis caused by the virus. A dystopia arose, yet in the midst of all the negativity, achievement society still found its way to aid the neoliberal socio-economic order. Through social media, feel good stories amid the pandemic portraying individuals going through terrible conditions have been used to amplify the *can* of achievement society. For example, the TV show *Kapuso Mo, Jessica Sobo* featured a story about teachers in Bukidnon who are forced to cross rivers just to bring modules to their students.<sup>30</sup> What could be derived from this? First, it depoliticizes the situation of the students and teachers. Second, it promotes positivity where students and teachers alike *can* rise above the challenges of the unjust order exacerbated by the pandemic. The depoliticization happens through the positivity of the narrative, and attempts to disguise the issue here of a neglected education system and also a poor treatment of those within the education system. The real political issue here is hidden, which would have been unmasked through negativity which questions the status quo. Moreover, the positivity of this narrative was amplified through shares on social media. It tells a story of the positive *can* which Han discusses, wherein one *can* continue education and work amid a terrible scenario. By this way, achievement-subjects who are already experiencing the brunt of the pandemic are further encouraged to exploit themselves because of the fact that some people who have it “harder” *can* do it, and so they can. It can be understood here that the depoliticization of the struggles of teachers and students created by positivity somewhat justifies the inequalities and shortcomings of our current society.

Aside from supposedly heartwarming stories of positivity, one of the most potent ways social media becomes a weapon for achievement society is the proliferation of *hustle culture*. Hustle culture is defined as the normalization of overworking oneself.<sup>31</sup> Hustle culture and its message is an effective way for achievement-subjects to exploit themselves as it promotes the idea of exploiting oneself to such a limit in order to realize what one *can* be. For example, an Instagram page that goes by the handle @6amsuccess referenced a tweet of Elon Musk, a well-known billionaire and owner of Tesla, which describes himself as working more than “16 hours a day, 7 days a week.”<sup>32</sup> This implies to the achievement-subject that one *can* become as successful as Musk if an individual is willing to overwork oneself. Furthermore, due to its positive nature, it endows upon the achievement-subject a sense of freedom and therefore, a sense of responsibility in order to achieve success through work. It would be useful to revisit the earlier sections of this paper, wherein, the old Freudian psychic apparatus of the obedience-subject is subjected to the super-ego, the heir of the Oedipus complex, and instills upon the subject duty and negativity. Now, achievement society positivizes the negative super-ego into the ego ideal, and seduces the achievement-subject to work, instead of compelling or endowing a sense of duty. The same thing happens through these social media posts that promote hustle culture, wherein there is no compulsion for the exploited, but rather, a voluntary self-exploitation, which is far more efficient than any form of disciplinary compulsion. Social media and hustle culture have basically justified the current order of inequality and exploitation, an order further exacerbated by the crisis of

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<sup>30</sup> See GMA News, “In Bukidnon, Teachers Risk Their Lives Just to Bring Modules to Their Students,” GMA News Online, June 22, 2021, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/lifestyle/content/792511/in-bukidnon-teachers-risk-their-lives-just-to-bring-modules-to-their-students/story/>.

<sup>31</sup> Afrina Arfa, “The Truth about the Hustle Culture,” Taylors University, September 1, 2021, <https://university.taylors.edu.my/en/campus-life/news-and-events/news/the-truth-about-the-hustle-culture.html>.

<sup>32</sup> See Success Motivation Quotes (@6amsuccess), “#6amsuccess,” *Instagram*, January 19, 2022, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CY5bwaDrGPY/>.

capitalism and the pandemic. A teacher who has no working internet? Do not mind the inhumane workload when there are teachers who cross rivers just to get their job done. Having financial difficulties due to the pandemic? Work 16 hours a day and risk your physical and mental health to get a better life. These are the examples of what kind of mentality is promoted by contemporary achievement society through social media. Depoliticized spaces devoid of negativity promote self-exploitation and preserve the status quo, while zombie-like achievement-subjects become consumed by mental illness and impotence. Furthermore, as stated earlier, the ego ideal plays a factor in depression, and the failure to satisfy this ego ideal created by poverty porn and hustle culture in an achievement society creates an atmosphere suited for the birthing of depressives and those who are burnt-out. Through social media and its ability to alter an individual's perception of work and work ethic, the problems of an achievement society became even more accentuated.

## Marx and Estrangement

Before going on with this paper, I found it necessary to take a short detour to discuss Marx's concept of alienation in relation to the achievement-subject and the overall discussion of this paper. Marx characterizes a worker sinking "to the level of a commodity" wherein the more they produce, the more suffering they encounter.<sup>33</sup> Furthermore, Marx says that the increasing value of the world of things leads to the devaluation of men and labor produces not only itself, but also the worker as a commodity.<sup>34</sup> Marx adds that the greater the product of labor, the lesser becomes the worker and that this product the worker has produced gains an external existence and is something alien that confronts the individual wherein this product of labor becomes hostile to the worker.<sup>35</sup> Marx's elucidation of alienation bears a similar relation to Byung-Chul Han's analysis of the achievement-subject. As discussed, the achievement-subject engages oneself into self-exploitation, wherein the more they exert their energy, the more wretched they become as they become prone to burnout and depression. In other words, the more individuals engage in a positive act (production), the more they encounter or put themselves in situations that negatively affect them (alienation or burnout). Or inversely, as the individual further negates oneself, the more profits they generate for the capitalist.<sup>36</sup>

How does Marx's worker and Han's achievement-subject become victim to such a scenario? How do they seemingly enter into such exploitative and oppressive relations when there is clearly no freedom in their case? The answer to this is a false sense of freedom created by laws and norms within society. Let me begin with Marx's analysis first. Under capitalism, the worker is seen as "free" compared to a feudal serf, and this is exactly what the ideologues of the current system have proclaimed in their defense of capitalism. Marx, on the contrary would argue in *Grundrisse*, that capital is set free, instead of individuals under the free competition propounded by capitalism.<sup>37</sup> In the first volume of *Capital*, Marx elucidates how the worker enters into relations with the capitalist. The owner of money or the capitalist enters the sphere of circulation in search for a specific commodity whose use-value also creates value. This commodity the capitalist is in search for is the capacity for labor or

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<sup>33</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 and the Communist Manifesto*, trans. Martin Milligan (Amherst, N.Y.: Prometheus Books, 1988), 69.

<sup>34</sup> Marx and Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 71.

<sup>35</sup> Marx and Engels, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 72.

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1973), 31.

<sup>37</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 650.

*labor-power*.<sup>38</sup> Yet, labor-power cannot exist apart from a worker as this is only a potentiality, hence the worker “surrenders its creative power, like Esau his birthright for a mess of pottage.”<sup>39</sup> Marx writes:

Rather, he necessarily impoverishes himself, as we shall see further on, because the creative power of his labour establishes itself as the power of capital, as an alien power confronting him. He divests himself [*entäußert sich*] of labour as the force productive of wealth; capital appropriates it, as such.<sup>40</sup>

Marx attempts to explain that the creative power of the worker’s labor becomes alien to the worker as it becomes the power of capital, the very thing that exploits labor. The products of the worker’s labor do not belong to him and its products such as innovations in science and technology simply become further means of capital’s domination over labor.<sup>41</sup> What transpires in this supposedly “free” transaction between worker and capitalist becomes the very gateway for the negation of the freedom of the worker and leads to his exploitation. A similar situation is apparent with Han’s achievement-subject. The positivized ego ideal that gives a false perception of freedom to the achievement-subject becomes the reason they exploit themselves. Marx’s worker sees itself liberated from feudal bondage and free to “work” for anyone they desire. Han’s achievement-subject sees itself freed from the restrictive super-ego yet, this freedom is only a *faux freedom* as they are bound up by themselves by their relentless self-exploitation. Marx’s conception of alienation can be seen as a precursor to Han’s theory of the achievement-subject and their relation to each other are demonstrated by the fact that their false sense of freedom leads them to enter exploitative relations/scenarios where, in their positive activity (production), they are negatively affected (alienated/burnt out).

But it is not just through structural homology we can relate Marx to Han. In fact, the relation between the notions of alienation and the achievement-subject goes deeper. One main feature of the classical concept of alienation is the fact that a worker is externally exploited, by the capitalist. It is the capitalist who benefits from the labor of the worker, creating a sense of alienation on the side of the worker. For Han, what constitutes the stability of contemporary neoliberal societies is its lack of class struggle and structure similar to what Marx witnessed in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>42</sup> Instead of aggression between classes, and the aggression of the working class directed at something external like the capitalist, the aggression of the individual is turned against oneself, and the exploitation, as mentioned earlier, is something done by an individual to oneself.<sup>43</sup> What does this mean then? Alienation, in a sense, still exists. An individual who works does not entirely reap the benefit of their labor. But at the same time, the drive to alienate oneself does not necessarily come from an external factor, but rather an internal aggression. What we may derive in Han’s concept of the achievement-subject is a way to rethink how alienation takes its form in a society of late capitalism. I have to be clear to my reader, that this is as far as I may go for this section as it is not the main focus of the study. What this section of the paper provides is a better understanding of class dynamics present in neoliberal society which affects the mode of exploitation by individuals.

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<sup>38</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (1867; repr., Harmondsworth: Penguin in association with New Left Review, 1990), 270.

<sup>39</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 307.

<sup>40</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 307.

<sup>41</sup> Marx, *Grundrisse*, 308.

<sup>42</sup> Byung-Chul Han, *Psychopolitics: Neoliberalism and New Technologies of Power*, trans. Erik Butler (London; New York: Verso, 2017), 6.

<sup>43</sup> Han, *Psychopolitics*, 7.

## The Achievement-Subject amid the Pandemic

Achievement society and its implications amid the pandemic can be characterized on two levels: the personal and socio-political. Furthermore, the achievement-subject in the context of COVID-19 can be characterized as depoliticized and exhausted. On a personal level, achievement-subjects are not able to question the status quo, they become burnt out, experience depression, and become reflexively impotent. On a socio-political level the status quo is preserved by the positivity of achievement society as it sheds negativity for the sake of efficiency.

To put these two insights into further detail, the pandemic has already exacerbated the mental health crisis brought about by neoliberal policies. The achievement-subject is made to consume copious amounts of positivity through positivized spaces like social media. As stated earlier, positivized spaces reduce negativity, and along with it, criticism. Hence, the product of this are achievement-subjects that are devoid of politicization and critical thinking. This depoliticization of the achievement-subject is further worsened by the ever-exploitative relations set by neoliberalism. The depoliticized achievement-subjects are resigned to their fates, wherein mental health problems such as burnout, depression, and other mental illnesses are privatized and the possibility of a social systemic causation is removed.<sup>44</sup> The removal of systemic causation and depoliticization of the achievement-subject prevents any form of active or substantial engagement with society.

Positivity rules out the possibility of negation and criticism. The depoliticized achievement-subject who does not engage with society further reinforces and justifies the status quo. In a society of positivity, the lack of negation creates an overwhelming influx of information. Yet this does not equate to the truth, as truth is a negative force.<sup>45</sup> The inability to generate truth in a depoliticized space such as social media has created disastrous effects amid the pandemic. It can be seen in the instance of the spreading of fake news and misinformation. On YouTube, there is no ‘dislike button’ and on Facebook, you can only ‘like’ and react. The absence of truth and depoliticization create an atmosphere that allows strongmen and fascistic agendas to prosper. It has allowed misinformed opinions about the vaccine to spread. An overly positivized space does not filter out lies as long as it is able to transmit information efficiently. On a social level, the status quo is maintained.

On a personal level, the achievement-subject is made to believe that they *can* rise above the adversities of the pandemic, in spite of the fact that most of the achievement-subject’s problems are linked to the shortcomings of the system itself. “Motivation” pages and poverty porn are avenues of positivity that encourage the achievement-subject to exploit themselves. Along with a seductive ego-ideal that creates a false sense of freedom, the achievement-subject becomes their own source of misery. Social media becomes a way to perpetuate messages and distort an achievement-subject’s view on work and how they ought to work. Instead of being compelled by external forces like a boss, achievement-subjects exploit and alienate themselves in the process. In their futile attempt to act on this supposed freedom, they burn themselves out. Any failure they meet along the way is blamed on themselves. They become depressives who think they are losers who failed to take responsibility on themselves, when in fact it is the system that has failed them. Individuals subject themselves to relentless exploitation and tiredness that is “driven by obsessive career moves.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Fisher, *Capitalist Realism*, 21.

<sup>45</sup> Han, *Transparency Society*, 8.

<sup>46</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *Pandemic: COVID-19 Shakes the World* (New York: OR Books, 2020), 27.

## Conclusion

This paper aims at studying the effects of social media and the positivity of achievement society on the achievement-subject in the context of the current pandemic and the prospective post-pandemic world. The paper began by elucidating the characteristics of achievement society and its difference with a disciplinary society. The study then described the achievement-subject, the obedience-subject, and their psyche. This was followed by a discussion of the impacts of social media on the achievement-subject and how achievement society utilizes the romanticization of overwork and exploitation as a means of furthering the productivity of achievement-subjects and in reinforcing the neoliberal paradigm in the socio-political and economic landscape. Furthermore, the study also briefly looked at Han's conception of the achievement-subject and its relation to Marx's notion of alienation.

Lastly, the study posited the following negative implications of social media and achievement society: 1.) Achievement society creates an atmosphere of positivity that depoliticizes the achievement-subject, eliminating the possibility of any form of critical engagement with society. Furthermore, due to this depoliticization, mental illnesses are privatized and any possibility of causation linked to structural defects of late capitalism are also eliminated. This then preserves the status quo. In the context of the pandemic, the spread of COVID-19 and the accompanying mental health crisis it has created are not causally linked to the failures and ineptitude of neoliberalism. 2.) Social media becomes an avenue of positivity which becomes harmful to the achievement-subject. First, due to its shedding of negativity, social media becomes a tool for misinformation and also populist politics to take hold. The lack of the negative power of truth in a positivized space removes the possibility of thorough criticism and the filtering of lies. Additionally, social media, through its content such as motivational posts and poverty porn, exacerbates the self-exploitation of the achievement-subject who is made to consume copious amounts of positivity by altering the achievement-subject's perception of work. Furthermore, achievement society leads to meaningless tiredness that is created by a desire to improve one's career. 3.) Achievement society and the positivized ego-ideal creates a false sense of freedom that leads to the self-exploitation of the achievement-subject.

These are just some of the negative effects of achievement society on the achievement-subject. As capitalism aims to survive its own disastrous effects by continuous improvements in its method of exploitation, as crises continue to wreak havoc on economies, we may see a pandemic with no end in sight: a pandemic of mental health illnesses brought on by a system that prioritizes people over profit.

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